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# BRAKES AND LEVERS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF ESSENTIAL SERVICES IN AFRICA

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Chief Executive Officer, African Union Development Agency

THIS INTERVIEW WAS CONDUCTED PRIOR  
TO THE COVID-19 CRISIS IN AFRICA



Ibrahim Assane Mayaki has been Chief Executive Officer of the African Union's New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) since 2009. In 2018, NEPAD was renamed the African Union Development Agency (AUDA-NEPAD). Dr. Mayaki was prime minister of Niger from 1997 to 2000, and is founder of the Public Policy Analysis Circle, a thinktank focused on health and education policy. He has taught public administration and management in France, Niger and Venezuela. His most recent book, *Africa's Critical Choices: A Call for a Pan-African Roadmap*, calls for pan-African solutions for the continent's development and exhorts younger generations to meet these challenges.

There are a range of factors that explain why Africa is lagging behind in terms of access to essential services: limited institutional capacities of African states and extreme centralization of decision-making processes, sparsity of institutional and technological support for innovation, and absence of legislation designating these services as common goods. Added to this are difficulties in financing such services, at a time when a number of countries are cutting their development aid budgets. But, bolstered by its resilience and innovation capacity, the continent boasts formidable resources that allow it to innovate and build new ways of access to services for the future, especially through supporting the capacity of citizens and SMEs for bottom-up innovation and through improvements to previously weak fiscal systems. These priorities are clear in the AUDA-NEPAD vision, which promotes multisectoral approaches, supports technological innovations and leverages impact assessments to convince other actors to commit to projects that are all-embracing and innovative.

## Access to essential services is a precondition for human development. What are the specifics of the situation on the African continent in terms of developing these services and making them available as widely as possible?

**Ibrahim Assane Mayaki:** It is absolutely unarguable that developing access to services like energy and water is an essential condition for human development. Access to essential services must always be approached in ways that are holistic and multisectoral and this is the vision promoted by AUDA-NEPAD. There is far more to development than simply adding up a given number of essential services because the interactions between them are so numerous, raising questions that touch on institutions and governance. Energy, for example, is a non-negotiable] for accessing all other services, be these education, health agricultural production.

*There is more to development than simply adding up a given number of services; it is a far more complex question of governance and multisectoral approaches*

Access is also a real challenge to the continent when you consider the trends we've seen in Africa over the past two decades. I want to raise these points here as they are fundamental to understanding the context. Firstly, our continent has yet to complete its demographic transition; according to UN statistics, Africa's population will double by 2050, rising from 1.3 billion in 2020 to 2.5 billion in 2050. And Africans will be increasingly urban, with 60% of them living in cities in 2050, according to the UN. They will of course need energy to power city services and underpin economic growth.

From the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century until very recently, Africa witnessed relatively sustained economic growth,

a fact noted and praised by all the leading international organizations. According to the World Bank, GDP growth in Sub-Saharan Africa averaged 5% annually from 2000 to 2014, then 2.2% from 2015 to 2018. This is clearly positive, for without growth it is impossible to develop access to services. But, sadly, this has not been accompanied by sufficient economic diversification to create enough jobs on the continent.

Also, given Africa's demographic growth, the number of Africans living in extreme poverty has not actually fallen by volume. In relative terms, the extreme poverty rate in Sub-Saharan Africa has fallen from 58% in 1999 to 41% in 2015, according to the World Bank. But in absolute terms, the number of people living in extreme poverty rose from 381 million in 1999 to 416 million in 2015. Some progress has been made, but if this trend continues there is a risk that we will soon be home to almost all the extreme poverty in the world. If nothing changes, forecasts show that Sub-Saharan Africa will be home to almost 90% of all humans living in extreme poverty in 2050.

Population growth, concentration of extreme poverty and rampant urban growth [...] Africa will face two fundamental crises within the next 20 to 30 years: a crisis of agricultural production, because its ever-growing population must be fed, and an energy crisis, because its ever more urban population will need a sufficient energy supply. It will have to provide its mostly urban population with quality services in a context where extreme poverty will continue to be present. This will likely have a real impact on the stability of governance systems and institutions. This clearly shows why development is far more than simply adding up possibilities of access to services – it is a far more complex question of governance and multisectoral approaches.





## What are the main brakes to the development of access to services in Africa?

**IAM:** I feel that the institutional question is extremely important. Sadly, African states do not have the capacity to deliver quality services fairly and efficiently to their populations, be it water, energy or health care.

The first brake centers on how public policies are determined and the appropriate scale for putting them into action. Finance is clearly also an essential question, but above all it is the way that public policies are determined that requires radical change. Decision-making has to be decentralized. Actors at the local level have the most accurate vision of needs and the appropriate mechanisms to deploy when delivering services. The role played by the central government should be limited to ensuring resources are allocated appropriately, then leaving local authorities responsible for management. The method used to define and manage a service has a direct incidence on the quality of the service delivered. The local level has a key role to play here.

Secondly, the rate of institutional innovation and co-production of public policies with stakeholders needs to be accelerated. Digital technologies can help here. Through their use of cellphones, the people of Africa have never been better connected. The percentage of smartphones in use is on track to rise from 39% in 2018 to 66% in 2025, according to the GSM Operators Association. Failure to embrace this phenomenon when adapting how services are accessed would be a massive error. We're already seeing new uses for these technologies to help with access: mobile payment systems with prepaid water meters, drones to ship spare parts for irrigation systems to remote areas, and so on. It's worth noting that these innovations have generally been rolled out without state help, in a process that is self-fueling and bottom-up. This is yet another argument in favor of decentralized decision-making as a way to deliver better access to services.

Lastly, we need to look again at how states legislate in terms of access to services. Water and energy, for example, are public goods that absolutely must be protected by legislative reforms that ring-fence their universal character: water must be defined as a human right, not a convenience provided by the state. These profound reforms are needed to guarantee access to resources for all and to protect the most vulnerable groups.

This means states must reinforce their institutional capacities. Investments in the supply of services by international bodies and development agencies regularly end in failure on rollout because they fail to account for institutional problems.

## In terms of financing these services, you often talk of an end to the development aid model in the coming years. What will be the implications for essential services?

**IAM:** In terms of development aid, the OECD and the UN both highlight two realities: developed countries do not always deliver what they promise, and there is a structural decrease in public development aid.

Development aid has had very positive impacts in heading off serious crises, and I'm thinking particularly of the Ebola epidemic. But it also has unwelcome consequences. Some of these relate to bureaucratic practices that can breach ethical norms, others to the fact that it stifles innovation. Development aid will diminish and no doubt disappear, which raises the following question: what are the learnings and priorities that will enable the continent to finance its own development in future?

The first, critically and urgently, is that Africa's states must boost their national income through raising tax revenues. Africa is the continent with the world's lowest tax take. The idea here is not to levy money from the poorest households, but to make sure that those who can are obliged to genuinely participate. The continent also needs to tackle illicit financial outflows: tax evasion, money laundering, corruption, etc. Africa loses tens of billions of euros illicitly every year – money that could be invested in our development.

The end of development aid will help us to become more inventive and innovative, and to embark on far-reaching fiscal reforms. It also opens the door to new, more horizontal partnerships, in particular with Europe. I share the view that Africa is Europe's

future. I believe in partnerships that are constructive for both continents, based on relationships between small- and medium-size businesses from Europe and Africa, and the transfer of environmentally friendly technologies. It is relationships of this type that will enable Africa to grow in influence over the years ahead.

*Decision-making has to be decentralized: it is the local level that has the most accurate vision of needs and the appropriate mechanisms to deploy when delivering services*

## What gives you the most hope for the development of essential services over the coming decade?

**IAM:** Africans are outstanding innovators. And as states come up against their own institutional limitations, as I mentioned above, it is the people of Africa who are innovating. Small businesses and startup networks are organizing to fast-track solutions that reflect local realities and local needs. Actors such as these often work in ways that are far more democratic than central administrations. They reach out to and involve local people, one of the keys to creating sustainable solutions for access to services. This is what state reform needs to look like: from the bottom up, giving power to innovative local actors so that they can realize their full potential.

Financing is another essential lever if they are to be given what they need to succeed. This is one of the biggest hurdles facing the continent's innovation ecosystem: the ideas are there but there's no financing. States could support this ecosystem by, for example, offering a system of guarantees to innovative startups.

*The end of development aid will help us to become more inventive and innovative, and to embark on far-reaching fiscal reforms*

## AUDA-NEPAD aims to facilitate and coordinate implementation of priority regional and pan-African continental projects. What are its areas of focus and actions in terms of access to essential services?

**IAM:** AUDA-NEPAD places enormous importance on multisectoral approaches. We are absolutely convinced that problems surrounding access to services, and by extension development, across the continent must be addressed with approaches that are holistic and coordinated. For example, we are currently working in a village in Niger, and across several other countries in West Africa, to design a program that combines solutions for supplying renewable energy with access to irrigation and health care. It is a very good illustration of the AUDA-NEPAD approach – all separate problems tackled together as a whole.

We also steadfastly believe that technological innovations can create solutions to the continent's problems. AUDA-NEPAD is the regional institution with the greatest focus on new technologies: artificial intelligence, drones, genetic adaptations to boost farming yields, and so on. This is another area of focus where the agency devotes much of its efforts.

There are a number of initiatives that structure AUDA-NEPAD's work to promote access to services. The Program for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA) was launched by the African Union Commission (AUC), AUDA-NEPAD and the African Development Bank (ADB) to improve infrastructure for energy, water, transport and ICT and, in so doing, to promote regional integration. We have chosen 51 priority projects, always looking for holistic approaches. For example, this initiative has so far made possible 3,500 kilometers of power lines. Another initiative, Sustainable Energy for All (SE4ALL), was launched in 2011 by the AUC, AUDA-NEPAD and the ADB in partnership with UNDP, the United Nations Development Program. It aims to achieve three main goals by 2030: provide universal access to modern energy services; improve energy efficiency; and double the share of renewable energy in the combined regional energy mix.

Our goal is to deploy, test and evaluate systems locally, then leverage the best approaches so that they are taken up and used in other regions and countries.

This also means that impact assessments are a third key pillar to our work. We design and deploy advanced assessment systems to help us identify the best possible configurations, but also to help us persuade other actors to copy our solutions.

